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ABSTRACT

Two colleagues in the field of composition studies speak to each other during a panel discussion titled, "Writing, Rhetoric, and 'Creative' Writing: Refiguring the Undergrduate Curriculum." The first respondent posits that academic department boundaries are out of date; they block the way to many useful collaborations. The same can be said about genres and genre boundaries. The boundaries were convenient in their moment. However, to put this in Derridean terms, reader-writer-teachers respond to genres by wanting to supplement them with something "different"--"dee-fer-aunt." One reason many regard departmentalism as an affliction is that departments are, to a degree, based on textual genres, which are illusory, contingent, enforced but unenforceable. If genre is "social action," could it not also be social inaction? Often the genre-training of college students is a way of quieting them, universalizing them, con-forming them, domesticating them. When educators are disappointed in students' writing, perhaps it is because they are genre-trained. In response, the second respondent argues that boundaries can create intellectual inaction--theory and practice together produce stereoscopic vision; writing and reading are partners; all writing is creative if it is allowed context, and all students are writers if they are allowed an existence in context, the complicated matrix of their lives. Contains three references. (TB)

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Letting the Boundaries Draw Themselves:

What Theory and Practice Have Been Trying to Tell Us

--An Exchange

Hans:

Genres in doubt, in play, in flux--the signs seem to be everywhere these days.

A colleague who teaches literature seminars tells me one of his students wrote a long poem instead of an essay to fulfill a term paper assignment. "For an instant," the colleague says to me. "I thought of all the knee-jerk reasons for not accepting the poem, but I thought, this student probably put more work, analysis, and original thinking into the poem than she has in any of her traditional papers, so I accepted it, evaluated it, ended up giving it a high grade."

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Andrea Lundsford visits our university, and in a colloquium several of us get on the subject of departments--departmentalism, if you will. We end up agreeing that department boundaries were not just out of date but often in the way: blocking many collaborations that seem so useful now. One example: I find myself collaborating more and more with colleagues from the Political Science department because we're all interested in representations of race and in relations between rhetoric and power. This work has made departmental boundaries seem arbitrary, at best.

The same can be said--and said for parallel reasons--about genres, genre boundaries. The boundaries are (were) convenient in their moment. However, to put this in Derridean terms (!), we reader-writer-teachers respond to genres by wanting to *suppplement* them with something *different*--or dee-fer-aunt. And I think it's clear that ONE reason many of us now regard departmentalism as an affliction is that departments are, to a degree, based on textual genres, which are illusory, contingent, enforced but unenforceable.

The business of our colleagues in sciences is to describe the behavior of physical energy. The sites of their inquiry are cells, particles, organisms, light, matter, and lightmatter (Matter Lite). But it's energy description, all of it, as far as I can tell. And by the way, these colleagues are just as allergic to departmentalism as we are. A colleague in chemistry is delighted to tell me that he really "does physics," and biologists, of course, "do chemistry."

Over in social sciences our colleagues stratify, datify, measure data treasure, and demarcate contours of bodies politic. Energy of human masses; that's what they describe.

Our business is energy, too, and that's why genres are so maddening, so full of implications for what we do every day in our writing, reading, interpreting, teaching embodiments. Maddening in the sense that language moves, is moved, and moves boundaries that try to contain it; it can be said to form (transitive and intransitive), flow, accelerate, thicken, disperse, escape, solidify. It means and signifies, whatever that means, and it resists meaning and significance. It's particle, it's wave, it's light and matter and neither.

That old-time genre study was not and is not equipped to deal with such oceanic energy. Genre study didn't even used to be genre theory. It used to be more like surveying. Northrop Frye's *Anatomy of Criticism*, for example, combined myth and literary formalism to create a sparkling, tidy, well-surveyed city of genres. No wonder we are sometimes nostalgic for the time we spent there.

Now genres, genre-study, and genre-theory are explosively bothersome. For we are back to the original questions. How does verbal energy get formed? We have our Heisenbergian problems, too, in other words. More mundanely, but no less fundamentally, what genres should we, do we, teach--and why, and why not? If genre is "social action" couldn't it also be social inaction? Often (a speculation) the genre-training of college students is a way of quieting them, universalizing them, con-forming

them, domesticating them, making them presentable to the corporate world--that is to say, the world. And when we are disappointed in our students' writing, perhaps we don't realize the degree to which genre-training has produced the disappointing writing.

Newt Gingrich knows "The Contract With America" is a performance poem and not a contract. Dan Quayle knows that a speech about family values is not a speech but a textual wink and nod evoking in his constituents' minds a precise image of certain kinds and colors of people. In some instinctual, Orwellian way, such politicians know more about genres that we do.

And the supposed shift from product to process in the composition curriculum has been illusory, at least in the sense that the writing processes we encourage still lead--across the curriculum and in English--to predictable pseudo-academic genres: things called papers. In 1994 as in 1974 and 1954, students have a bunch of papers due, which they don't like to write and we don't like to read.

College teachers enjoy reading about 5 per cent of the papers they get from students, and I'm being generous. Our goal in tossing out old products, introducing new ones, and letting the boundaries draw themselves should be to raise the pleasure percentage at least 50 per cent. This is what practice has been trying to tell us.

What theory has been trying to tell us is that genre boundaries and hierarchies are means of creating social capital. They mark status and buttress privilege and pretension. At least this is, in part, what Pierre Bordieu has argued. In academia--on

campuses--this means that genres are a kind of play money. Their inherent value should be doubted. But the idea of their being *play* should be taken more seriously. Our field of English studies, its dizzying number of subfields, our classrooms--are all sites in which genres are in play, in doubt, in flux. Every discipline should embrace the fact that it is playing riffs on its own genre "melodies": its conventions and demarcations. The jazzing around should be out in the open. This is what theory has been trying to tell us.

Wendy:

To prepare myself for the '94 MLA, a week in academic discussion, I iron five white shirts and reflect on my last three day's oasis of reading--*Women Writing the Academy, Seeing Yourself as a Teacher* and *The Peaceable Classroom*. I have to read, play with poems and iron, and send e-mail to Hans, to write a talk, and in doing that, I've broken down the boundaries between private and public, personal and academic, then, THEN I'm ready to go. I dance to Brazilian music, chomp on a carrot, hang up a blouse, write these lines, and go back to another blouse before the iron runs out of water, falls on the ironing board, burns the rug, the back room the whole house, everything I care about, and leaves me empty. I do **want** the cacophonous clutter of the world, though that world is a dangerous place, and I keep it in place with words--boundaries help, some, but so often they hinder.

Hans claims: "Language moves, is moved; it can be said to form (transitive and intransitive), flow, accelerate, thicken, disperse, escape, solidify. It means and signifies

whatever that means, and it resists such behavior; it supplements and differs." Mary Rose O'Reilley adds "The inner world is what literature is all about. Why have we forgotten that?"

I've refurnished the rooms of every classroom I've ever entered. Literally, I haul podiums to corners, pick up trash, move flimsy armed desks nose to nose, erase old chalk marks, make new ones, dust handprints onto my jacket or jeans pockets, always try to adjust the melancholy thermostat. Equally, I've had to unteach a lot--I've had to teach A-earning high school students that experimental writing, taking risks, is not baby work and silly play. I've had to teach English majors who, like me, exempted from first-year writing, that they really did have a writing process and a need to understand it. More, that they had reading processes, internalized, hidden, dark, myopic and conventional or deficient-feeling and hang-dog. I've had to shove the couch of creative writing into the overcrowded parlor of composition and allow for the complexity of a literacy life (ironing, eating carrots, dancing to music, not writing, in order to read and write) to students whom some of my colleagues define as empty vessels, adrift in a sea of popular culture. Because we disrespect our students, we keep shoving them into smaller and smaller rooms, from the living room of English literature to the laundry room of writing or the back porch of intro-to-literature-for-non-majors.

Does it matter that one blouse isn't white--it has a pattern on it that almost loses the small stain I find while ironing. I wonder how I actually got that stain and I make up the story I might say about it if someone noticed it on my blouse when I wear it. Does it matter that I lied about having only white blouses? They were *predominately* white. I

must have looked in the ironing closet and said to myself, all white, then everything I wear will match, but I realize, now, I can never resist the one last motion, to add a dash of something else.

I'm tired of penurious, parsimonious curriculums that never let my students choose something else, something **and**. I'm tired of genres that fit. Hans asks "Is genre a social inaction."

Mary Rose O'Reilley believes "Students do not really listen well to the answers to questions they have not learned to ask" (34).

Do you believe me about the four white and one patterned shirts? Does it matter that each shirt (white or multi-colored) is a text for it owner, ironer? The patterned shirt has it's story printed on it in the words *1987 Official Esprit Sport, FlexArama, Sun Club.* Should I be allowed to speak at the MLA wearing such a story?

In the Atlanta airport, a woman turned to me and said: "you must be going to MLA" I agreed. We exchanged university names like members of a secret society. Then she asked what I taught: "Rhetoric and Composition and Creative Writing," I said.
Oh, she said--an 18th century literature scholar--"Why are you going to MLA?"
"They let some of us in now, " I said.

Should I be allowed to speak at the MLA wearing such a story? I'd like you to feel the tenderness I feel for that patterned shirt, bought one summer in graduate school in

rhetoric and reminding me still of steamy humid Pennsylvania days studying words and words, reminding me also of another shirt, lost in the airfreight back to what was then home, Fairbanks, Alaska. I have been arguing, lately, that we need to teach convention making and convention breaking together, in concord, in strife, in dialog. Mary Rose O'Reilley says "I believe it is possible to examine our subject matter, whatever it may be, through a glass of tenderness as well as through the glass of reason" (82).

What is our subject? Theory, practice, boundaries. No, students. No, ourselves. Mary Rose O'Reilley, says: "because teaching is some kind of spiritual inquiry, what we learn is more important than what they learn. It is more important, at least, to our passage; they are going someplace else; they are in a different myth . . . "(72).

I once admired Georgia O'Keeffe when I read that she only wore white shirts and black pants. But look at the paintings. In our teaching, if we wear the institutional clothes, what are we painting in the classroom? Are we remembering the explosion of colors that is the kaleidoscope of thought?

Is the problem of boundaries one of gender, insiders and outsiders? Why the sudden interest in boundary rhetoric? What if we spill colors on our white shirts? Will we continue to wear them? Is there a reason on earth to or not to? I like the phrase *No Reason on Earth*--it's the title of a good friend, Katherine Haake s, collection of short stories. I like it because it reminds us, boundaries, contact zone, inner or outer circles or not, we are constructing the reasons and we can reason with the constructs. Aren't

we unethical to agree to genre as social inaction? Listen to this writer in another discipline:

> Historians typically distinguish between "narrative" on the one side, which is this cute little storytelling mode, and "analysis" on the other, which is somehow . something else that historians do ever so much better. The difficulty has been dichotomization. There's no reason on earth why you can't write an analytical narrative. But they ignore all the ways in which a narrative, by definition, is analytical: narrative involves intelligence; it makes assumptions and judgments; [it] shapes itself; [it] has an engine; it explains its progress. All of those things are part of narrative, and I don't quite know why the dichotomy as to be there. The institution ought to reconsider the categories. I'm not the only one who is disgusted. There are many, many historians who can't quite understand why we are still locked into these irrational categories. (Kirsch 120-121)

Boundaries can create intellectual inaction--theory and practice together produce stereoscopic vision, writing and reading are partners, all writing is creative if we allow it context and all students are writers if we allow them an existence in the context, the complicated matrix of their lives. In a recent promotion review letter, a composition scholar (or is he a writer, or theorist or practitioner) who I respect, shared observations on my professional attempts to break boundaries and gave me a key to what I've been getting at:

> . . rather than simply being pluralistically "eclectic" or "well rounded" and as it were, simply moving comfortably from one well-furnished room to another," he

said, "She keeps insisting on redecorating the rooms with furniture from the others--and knocking down walls and partitions."

Changing the furniture in the classroom doesn't mean throwing the classroom out with the bathwater--it's still a classroom. But things happen when we sit different places, view different angles, accused neither of dilettantism or dilution. If you try to view my remarks through the lens of compassion, you'll see that I'm insisting that we make teaching and learning real life, the institution a real house, inhabited by real people.

Four of the shirts are white, one is patterned. I've had four offices in five years at my present school; I've taught at six schools in seventeen years. I eat a carrot and read a friend's good book on teaching and listen to Portuguese and African influenced music and think of talking to Hans about all this and iron, in order to arrive. When I return, I'll write three syllabi that borrow from each other--creative writing activities to inhabit literature, theory to explore the textual claims of the literary nonfiction texts we'll write and workshop, and poetic form to teach invention rather than convention.

Collaborating together in several genres, Hans and I have learned that our students, in a similar way, need to write themselves. They need to write about writing, about themselves as newcomers and lovers and scared tender souls thrown into the flux of university life to brazen it out. They have lives and those lives continuously burst through the boundaries and dams of English department control. Hydroelectricity might be helpful here--to draw on, use, create with, generate with--we've already lost the wild lakes and rivers in the damned up boundary wars of K-12 schooling. In *Howard's End*,

E.M. Forester said, "Life demands that we connect the prose and the poetry" (qtd in O'Reilley 53)." For us, letting the boundaries draw themselves means being drawn into what we teach and residing there more ethically, letting students iron shirts and eat carrots too in order to write, to redecorate when the classroom furniture gets mildewed and musty, to unlock irrational categories, to connect the prose and the poetry.

Because. . . .

Hans:

Because. . . .

I am in the Seattle-Tacoma airport, waiting to fly to San Diego. Often when I go to conferences I buy a new white shirt, get it out of its plastic wrapping, unpin it, and put it on without ironing it. Doing so reminds me of black-and-white Hollywood movies, starring Alan Ladd or John Garfield, in which the hero is on the run. The hero unpacks his suitcase in a seedy hotel and takes out new shirts and throws them in a drawer before getting out a bottle of whiskey. I don't do the whiskey thing, but I still like the shirt thing. There's something adolescent and irresponsible (John Garfield, Robert Mitchum) about putting on a new shirt without ironing it, especially when you're headed for an unbearably responsible conference.

In order for my story to parallel Wendy's I would have to run into a woman at the Sea-Tac airport who would stare at my chocolate brown leather jacket, my shirt with the

geometric fold lines on it, and my moussed-up (messed up) hair, and the woman would have to say, "Are you going to the O.J. trial," and I would have to say, "No, I'm going to MLA," and she would have to say, "What's that?" and I would have to say, "I can't tell you, but I can tell you that I think O.J. is guilty."

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